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CIA needs renewed vigor

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In the aftermath of the Watergate scandals, with revelations of abuses of the intelligence-gathering function by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Presidents Ford and Carter imposed restrictions on the activities of both agencies. Now, in the aftermath of the revolution in Iran, it is becoming clear that the CIA has lost much of its ability to assess and predict political changes abroad that may affect the welfare of the United States.

The lost intelligence-gathering capability must be regained. But that should not be at the expense of proper supervision of the CIA by elected officials. Without the kind of oversight that makes it answerable to the American people, an agency like the CIA can become a kind of shadow government that carries out its own foreign policy and gets involved in domestic political affairs.

Congress is considering legislation to establish charters for the FBI and the CIA — spelling out the kinds of activities they are to undertake, the oversight to which they must submit and penalties for violating their authority. Predictably, civil libertarians warn that the administration's draft charters are too general and permissive, while the intelligence community says that even general prohibitions will "smother initiative."

The CIA was set up in 1947 with the basic function of gathering and distributing information. The idea was essentially to allow the president to make informed decisions.

But gradually over the years the CIA expanded its activities to include not only gathering information but acting on information as well. While there have been abuses on the information-gathering side, by far the more chilling have been the CIA's so-called "covert" activities — attempts to assassinate foreign leaders, foment revolutions, develop and test biological and chemical weapons, and so on.

Given this history of active lawlessness, it makes sense to require the CIA to obtain presidential approval for and report to Congress on covert operations. Over the past 10 years, the agency's blunders have severely damaged the nation's credibility abroad.

In terms of information-gathering, however, a stronger effort is called for. Critics have charged that the CIA has slipped into relying on reports from foreign intelligence agencies instead of generating its own, and that the agency is now more concerned to tell presidents what they want to hear (for example, that the shah's regime would survive the ayatollah) than to discover the truth.

If the CIA were to concentrate its energies on finding things out instead of trying to make things happen, it could perform its unique, invaluable function without itself endangering the security of the nation. And it would probably do a better job of information-gathering. As any scholar knows, nothing stands in the way of discovery like a personal stake in the answer.